GENERATIONS IN TOWNS

GENERATIONS IN TOWNS: SUCCESSION AND SUCCESS IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL URBAN SOCIETIES

Edited by

Finn-Einar Eliassen and Katalin Szende

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CHAPTER ONE

GENERATIONS IN TOWNS: AN INTRODUCTION

KATALIN SZENDE AND FINN-EINAR ELIASSEN

Until recently, few books – and not many articles – have been devoted to the topic of generations in history, none of them dealing specifically with generations in urban settings in pre-modern times. This collection of articles is an attempt to fill some of this gap, providing twelve studies of generations in late medieval and early modern European towns, ranging from the Mediterranean to the Nordic countries, with a time-span from the fourteenth to the early nineteenth century. "Generations in Towns" was the topic of a specialist session at the eighth conference of the European Association of Urban Historians in Stockholm in August 2006, organized by the editors of this volume, and with five of the present authors (*Baker*, *Flóra*, *Goda*, *Harding*, and *Vardić*) presenting papers, which have since been considerably reworked and edited into the articles appearing here. In addition, we have invited a select group of historians who have been dealing with the topic to submit articles on regions and/or aspects of the theme not covered by the original participants, and the editors have each written an article on the basis of their own research and readings, as well as this introduction.[1]

I

The term

The original meaning of the term generation is the act of producing offspring, from the Greek word γενεά. In modern usage, it can have several other meanings as well. A generation can be a stage or degree in a succession of natural descent (grandparent–parent–child), it can also be

[1] The editors wish to thank Vanessa Harding for reading and commenting on the introduction.

defined as the average interval of time between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring, or as a cohort of people born into a particular span of time. The term is also used in non-human contexts, about insects or rodents in laboratory research, or demarcating stages of technological progress, as in generations of computers, or cellphones. In Ulrike Jureit's words, *"Generation ist ein zeitlicher Ordnungsbegriff"* (Generation is a chronological ordering principle).[2]

In the humanities, the concept of generations seems to have attracted the greatest interest among sociologists, philosophers and literary historians, who have also been pioneers in historicising the concept, and in applying it to historical material.[3] Art historians have benefited from the term as an ordering principle for stylistically related, but chronologically not exactly definable works; and used the changes of generations as an explanation for the changing of styles.

Generations in history

In history, generations can be seen as a nexus of family and society, combining a view of history as a continuous flow of individuals as parents and children within families with a conception of collective generations as stages in the history of a country, a social or cultural group, or even mankind as a whole.

In the first place, generations have been and are still being used in a diachronic or vertical sense, as *markers and measurement of time*. In this context, it can be regarded as one of the most "human" time units. In the Bible, in Roman and Old Norse literature, generations were used like a measuring rod, to mark the passage of time, and to place individuals in a time sequence. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians tried to turn this relative time into absolute time by calculating decades and centuries on the basis of generations in the sources, conventionally assuming each generation to equal 30 years. On the basis of this formula, which was applied not to groups of people, but to the individual lives of kings or other central characters in the literature, historians were dating events with great confidence to the nearest decade, and sometimes even to

[2] Jureit 2006, 6.

[3] Jaeger 1985; Parnes, Vedder and Willer 2008. As a sign of awakening interest in the urban aspects of the theme, the Graduiertenkolleg *Generationenbewusstsein und Generationenkonflikte in Antike und Mittelalter* at the University of Bamberg organized a workshop on "Generationen in spätmittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Städten" in February 2009, see http://www.uni-bamberg.de/gk-ggam/news/tagung_staedte (last accessed: 27.05.2009).

precise years. Once considered revolutionary, this technique has since the early twentieth century been largely discredited. Not only may genealogical lists be incomplete, and sometimes largely fictitious, also the assumed standard generation length of thirty years has been debated (see below). Especially the application of a statistical average figure to individual lives has been rejected for what it is: a logical and mathematical error.

However, the genealogical lists in the Bible and in Icelandic sagas had and have other uses. They show that in these societies, previous and following generations were a *means of identification*, placing individuals within a meaningful and context of predecessors (son of …., son of …., son of ....) or descendants (.... got ...., who got ...., who got ....) in terms of patrilineal families. The consciousness of the descent from a famous – real or mythical – ancestor was an ideal tool to strengthen the identity and cohesion of a family or dynasty, although it did not eliminate family conflicts altogether.

Recording the line of descent had of course more practical aims, too: first, to determine those who were entitled to own and inherit the family property and any eventual rank and title connected to it; second, to comply with the regulations on marriage restrictions which stated the necessary distance between the spouses in terms of degree of kin. The first of these considerations applied mainly to the upper, land-owning strata of society, the second theoretically to everybody, but it had more relevance to the rich and noble. Consequently, generational consciousness, a concept to be further refined below, varied greatly in its form and strength within different layers of society, and between different societies in different towns.

The modern form of using the line of descent as an ordering principle is the genealogical research which forms the basis of *family histories*. These come in different shapes, from simple genealogies in table or tree form, via more or less private compilations of data and traditions about earlier generations, to published family chronicles in article or book form, and nowadays increasingly as electronic resources. In their most developed form, often written by professional historians or other academics, these studies place the lives and careers of previous generations in their historical contexts, with relevant references to literature and sources. One of the protagonists of this field argues indeed that a more appropriate term for genealogical scholarship would be "generational history".[4]

[4] Mills 2003.

In some cases, general (e.g. national) history is being told through the history of a single family. One of the most impressive of these attempts is the German historian Percy Ernst Schramm's history of his own family from the end of the Thirty Years' War to the end of the Second World War.[5] In the *Vorwort*, the author claims that the book is only superficially a family history. His real aim is to study the basic problems (*Grundprobleme*) of German history through the saga of a single family, thereby making what he considers the most important features clearer (*anschaulicher*) than in a general overview of this time-span.[6] This might be called "family history as general history", to signal the problematic relationship between micro and macro levels of history which it contains. Disappointingly, however, this brilliant historian neglects the opportunity to problematise both this relationship and the meaning and significance of generations in history.

More satisfactory from this point of view is the treatment of generations in *history of the family*, as distinct from the individual family histories treated above. Although rarely explicitly discussed as generations, the theme crops up in various contexts, under headings like reproduction, parents–children relationships, family and household structure, family cycles, household reproduction, succession and inheritance. Anthropological and sociological theories and perspectives on family, kinship and household often underpin such studies. It should thus come as no surprise that it was one of the most prominent historians of the family, David Herlihy, who first discovered the potential of generations in the context of medieval history.[7]

Generation studies can also be seen as a qualitative form of *historical demography*, especially in family reconstitution studies, where the linking of generations is a key element in building data bases. From such studies, generation lengths and changes can be empirically reconstructed, as distinct from the theoretical treatment of such topics which we shall discuss below. From a quantitative demographic viewpoint, generations can be studied as age cohorts, or clusters of such cohorts, consisting of persons born in the same year, decade or other period. Such "pure cohorts" can be considered to determine life expectancy, but also serve as a basis for sociological studies of for instance marriage, career, or migration patterns. On a more qualitative level, such studies can take the form of "collective biographies" of a cohort, to compare, for instance, the social

[5] Schramm 1963.
[6] Ibid., vol. I, 5.
[7] Herlihy 1974/1978.

structure of age groups between different generations, such as persons born in 1871, 1901, 1931, 1961, and so forth.

Implicitly, generations are a crucial element in *legal history*, especially when discussing issues of inheritance and transmission. In the first place, legal norms and legal practice in past societies touch upon generations on several levels. Legal scholarship establishes how property was transferred and to what extent the descendants and other degrees of kin were entitled to a share in it. A second, equally important contribution of legal history is to identify the occasions of transmission and their relationship to the life cycle. Thirdly, finding patterns behind the norms and regulations for various social groups in space and time inevitably leads to examining terms and conditions of generational shifts – a challenge not very often taken up by legal historians.[8]

Gender studies, with its increasing input from the 1970s and 80s, offers a different view on generations from the other disciplines presented above. Legal history and much of family history, following the contemporary legal norm, concentrate on the male line of descent and thus on generations of men; historical demography has a more balanced (or sometimes more neutralized) view. The relatively new emphasis on gender brings women out from the bedchambers and kitchens of past homes and shows their role in family, business and in some cases even in the public sphere. Although some such studies reflect too modern expectations by extolling "independent" and "self-supporting" women in all strata of society, gender studies have certainly raised the interest in female contributions to succession and inheritance. This is especially significant in urban contexts, as several studies in this volume also show.

Most historians, however, have been more interested in what we might term "generations of experience" (*Generationen als Erlebnisgemeinschaften*[9]), as cohorts of people who are born into and shaped by events, trends and developments in a specific span of time. More particularly, such a generation is usually defined as sharing a common formative experience, such as a war, a revolution, a great discovery, a major natural or economic catastrophe, or a cultural or political upheaval. One can speak about the Reformation generation, the generation of 1848, the Hitler generation in Germany, the Beat generation, and so on.[10] In more limited cultural fields, there are found generations (usually seen as "great generations") of composers, of writers, of painters, of scientists, who can then be used as

[8] An example of the comprehensive treatment of these issues in the context of English nobility: Spring 1993.
[9] Parnes et al. 2008, 12.
[10] Ibid., 11–12.

marking periods of cultural history.[11] Refining the concept even further, Pierre Nora included generation among the *lieux de mémoire*, the "realms of memory" or in other words those crucial points of reference that shape people's relationship to their past and present. He regards the French Revolution as the "root of the phenomenon", explaining the appearance of the "generation of 1968" as its direct consequence.[12]

This approach, just like the demographic one outlined above, implies a synchronic or horizontal concept of generations. The further back one goes in time, the more difficult it is to apply this approach, owing to the limitations of the sources. For the last two or three generations, methods of oral history can be utilized along with films, diaries and the printed press. The latter two groups of sources that can be complemented with autobiographies, theatre plays and other literary genres are readily available for the nineteenth and partly for the eighteenth century as well. For the Middle Ages and Early Modern times, however, while the prevailingly legal, administrative and financial texts contain ample data on families and descent in a diachronic sense, the relatively small number of memoirs, narrative and literary texts hardly allows a reliable reconstruction of any "common sets of experiences".

Generations and events

In the historical literature, there have been two schools of thought on the relationship between generations and historical events.[13] The radical view sees generations as the basic or independent variable of the two, claiming that generations can be objectively defined and identified, and that different generations shape events in different ways. Julián Marías, building on the writings of José Ortega y Gasset, saw generations as an expression of essential relations between private and collective life.[14] In one of the more recent (and more ambitious) presentations of this position, William Strauss and Neil Howe see the history of the United States of America as the product of a cyclical change of generations, alternating between adaptive, idealist, reactive, and civic attitudes over cycles of four generations.[15]

There are at least two main difficulties with this view. The first concerns the explanatory power of generations, compared to other sections

[11] Ibid., 18–19.
[12] Nora 1996.
[13] Spitzer 1973; Jaeger 1985.
[14] Marías 1970, 173.
[15] Strauss and Howe 1991.

of a population, such as age-groups, occupational or socioeconomic groups or local communities. Any generation, in whichever way it is defined, is bound to contain persons with widely different backgrounds, experiences, and views. The other problem is the delimitation of one generation from another. Whatever the protagonists of this view claim, these borderlines must necessarily be arbitrary, as Johan Huizinga has pointed out.[16] Births follow each other in a continuous succession, and at no point is there a clear break between one generation and the next. Admittedly, in some periods, fewer children are born, and, other things being equal, these cohorts will in their turn produce less numerous offspring than their predecessors and successors a generation later. But these demographic "troughs" do not represent a natural watershed between generations, but rather a cyclical change between great and small generations. So it does not solve the problem of the borderline between the generations. In principle, as Alan Spitzer has put it, "There is one (generation) born every second".[17]

Even the "average length" of a generation, whether it be assumed to be 30, 25 or 15 years, is a theoretical and highly disputable construction. Marías admits this, but argues that "historical generations" (as Marías calls them) can still be identified and reconstructed by taking one "eponym", a central year in the life of the most representative member of a "decisive generation" as a point of departure. One should then add years, one by one, on both sides of this central year, until a point is reached when, judged by some key characteristic of the generation in question, a year has more in common with the preceding or succeeding generation, and which will then be one outer limit of the previous or the following generation. Marías works out an interval of about 15 years between these "breaks" – a time-span he takes as the typical length of one generation.[18] This "historical generation" is not only markedly different from a "natural generation" – the average time-span between the births of parents and the births of their children (whatever that may be). It also fails to solve the key problem, since the criteria will always be disputable and – even more important – these characteristics will not be present or change at the same time or to the same degree in every social group, every locality or both genders, not to mention every individual. This was recognised already by Karl Mannheim, who distinguishes between a generation who experiences

[16] Huizinga 1965, 73–74; quoted in Spitzer 1973, 1355.
[17] Spitzer 1973, 1355.
[18] Marías 1970, 100, 172–178. Cf. Spitzer 1973, 1357.

the same concrete historical problems, and separate generation units who work up their common experiences in different specific ways.[19]

In 1977, Hans Jaeger could observe that the mainstream of modern research on historical generations was "cautiously empirical, with very moderate theoretical expectations". The same can probably be said today, despite Strauss' and Howe's major opus mentioned above. Jaeger also noted a stronger interest in discontinuities in age groups and cohorts than in the search for uniformity in either of them.[20]

Dealing with generations in families is a much less controversial approach, which avoids many problems of the macro-historical approaches to generations. In actual families, a generation does not necessarily equal an age group. There may be substantial age differences between spouses already in first marriages, but especially in the case of remarriages, which were common in earlier times. In the latter cases, there would also be great differences between the ages of children from successive marriages. Statistical models of "typical" or "average" generations would completely fail to take these quite usual phenomena into account, but family history studies will both bring them out and make them understandable.

Secondly, some of the key issues in generational studies can only be researched through individual families. These concern the crucial questions of succession and transmission – succession to positions in the family, kin group and society, transmission of roles, titles and property.[21] *"Das Gut rinnt wie das Blut"* (Goods flow as blood does) – this old German proverb summarizes the basic principle of legal inheritance.[22] It clearly expresses that family relationships are more important than cohorts or age-groups for explaining inheritance patterns, business and political roles. Legal history as a discipline, referred to above, takes up these issues first and foremost on the level of norms or legal systems, but all too often fails to compare them with cases from real life. These issues are central in all the studies presented in this volume, which look at practical examples in different urban contexts.

Jaeger claimed that there is no way that research on generations within families can be turned into a study of the historical process as a whole, for

[19] Mannheim 1959, 304. Cf. Spitzer 1973, 1354, 1356.
[20] Jaeger 1985, 280.
[21] Szende and Eliassen 2005; Goody, Thirsk and Thompson (eds) 1976; Greven 1970, esp. 11–12, 16–18.
[22] This was also the title of a workshop on comparative legal history of inheritance: «Das Gut rinnt wie das Blut»? Erbfolge und Verwandtschaft in der europäischen Geschichte vom 27./28.10.2006 in Bielefeld, see http://wwwhomes.uni-bielefeld.de/kgottschalk/images/Expose_Workshop.pdf, last accessed 29.04.2009.

the reasons that have been mentioned above.[23] In a strict sense, this is certainly true. But while there is no short-cut from aggregate data to generations in families, it is both possible and desirable to generalise and problematise generations on the basis of a great number of generational studies of individual or groups of families, such as the ones presented here. Some of these general issues and questions will be addressed in the final section of this introduction.

II

The articles in this volume cover a wide field, both geographically, chronologically and thematically. They stretch from the Mediterranean (chapters 2 and 7) via Central Europe (chapters 3, 4, 6, 7, 11 and 12) to Britain and Scandinavia (chapters 5, 8, 9 and 13). They range from the Late Middle Ages to the turn of the nineteenth century, addressing the issues of generations in family (chapters 2–5), politics (chapters 6–9 and 13) and business (chapters 10–13).

Generations in families

Whatever other aspects and implications generations may have had in urban society, they were first and foremost a family phenomenon, and generational issues in other fields always had a foundation within the family sphere. Consequently, the first four articles in this volume deal with generations within urban families. *Zrinka Pešorda Vardić* writes about rich non-noble families in late medieval Dubrovnik (Ragusa). *Katalin Szende* presents inheritance patterns of movable goods in Pressburg (Bratislava, Pozsony) in the same period. *Gesa Ingendahl* addresses the situation and family strategies of widows in early modern Ravensburg. In the fourth essay, *Thomas Riis* demonstrates the varied experiences, mainly decline, of families in various early modern towns in Europe.

In order to evaluate the importance of generations in urban families, it is useful to start with a sobering fact: in early modern European towns, only a limited number of families produced generations. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, the later Pope Pius II remarked exactly the same in his description of Vienna, one of the biggest towns in Europe east of the Rhine: “there are hardly any people living in the town whose grandparents would be known to the neighbours; old families are rare”.[24] His statement

[23] Jaeger 1985, 281.
[24] Sarnowsky (ed.) 2005, 26.

would probably hold true for most pre-modern towns. This was partly due to the extensive mobility in and out of towns, which meant that many families stayed in any one town for less than one generation, the mobility of the younger generation, especially young single persons, being especially high. Besides mobility, the high levels of mortality in towns – especially the greater towns – played a part in limiting the presence of generations. In early modern London, less than half of all marriages resulted in surviving offspring, as *Vanessa Harding* points out (with reference to Sylvia Thrupp) in a later section of this volume (chapter 8). In the present section, this fact is clearly demonstrated for Pressburg/ Bratislava in Western Hungary in *Katalin Szende*'s study (chapter 3) and for Ravensburg in *Gesa Ingendahl*'s article (chapter 4). The relationship between townspeople with several generations' residence on the one hand and relative newcomers and "passers-through" on the other was undoubtedly one of the main fault lines in early modern urban society. The former would normally consider themselves the "real" townspeople, whereas the latter could be assumed to have less of a stake in the town and its internal life.

Turning to the families which did produce several urban generations, and which are our concern here, we can start by asking what kind of *generational experience* they may have had. Again, it is useful to start with some demographic facts. Most children cannot have known their own grandparents, simply because the latter usually did not live long enough, given a relatively high average age of marriage – and an even higher one of remarriage.

As a consequence of this, *generational consciousness* may have been less developed in urban families than among the nobility or even peasant society in the countryside. There were certainly more impersonal relationships and institutional frameworks in towns than outside them, perhaps making family and generational ties less crucial to an individual than in a rural community. Or one can view this phenomenon the other way round, namely that the weakness of family ties and the great number of rootless migrants in towns necessitated the establishment of institutions for social care, especially of the old – a function otherwise performed by younger generations within the family.

The requirement, when applying for a membership in a craft guild, to produce a testimony of legitimate birth only, and not a proof of four or eight ancestors of the same standing, as was the case with the nobility (*"Ahnenproben"*) points to the same low expectations. But there was obviously a class dimension in this field: The leading burgher families were often extremely family and generation conscious, and none more so,

perhaps, than the regents of the leading Dutch towns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Forming closed oligarchies which dominated urban and national politics over generations and even centuries, they pursued marriage policies like those of the nobility in order to perpetuate their social and political power.[25] The same was done in many Dalmatian towns, where the closed leading circles were termed *nobiles*. Similarly closed circles and carefully recorded descent characterized the patriciate of the German imperial cities. Burghers often adopted family coats of arms and perpetuated their genealogies in richly illustrated *Geschlechterbücher* to bolster their status by invoking generations of predecessors. A culture of remembrance in towns would often be based on the memory of the elites, to the extent that the succession of the leading families was turned into the history of the town itself.[26]

Admittedly, there is a source problem in studying this phenomenon. Often, last wills are the most usual or only sources available to the researcher in high enough numbers to establish trends and patterns. Other, though less representative, sources include diaries, private letters, descriptions of family relationships in court cases and the like. As *Katalin Szende* shows in her study (chapter 3), testaments rarely mentioned the parent generation of the testator. And the ancestors further back, who were especially important in noble families, are generally invisible. Since testaments were basically forward-looking documents, more concerned with offspring than with ancestors, this is not surprising. But even grandchildren were sparsely represented in these wills, which were mainly concerned with the relationships within the family core. As we have seen already, there were strong demographic reasons for this.

The relations between parents and children, frequently from different marriages, could often be problematic. But even the relationships of a child to his or her father and mother and the relatives on the maternal and paternal side were not the same, especially with the usual considerable age difference between the father and mother. This was the case in Dubrovnik, where not only the so-called *nobiles*, but also the group of wealthy commoners were following the Mediterranean family pattern, as presented by *Zrinka Pešorda Vardić* (chapter 2). Often it is even difficult to identify family ties at first sight, especially among in-laws and in connection with remarriages, when names do not coincide. In Early Modern towns, parish registers of baptism, marriage and death, lists of newly admitted burghers, or even property deeds can help identify otherwise obscure relationships,

[25] Adams 2005.
[26] Studt 2007, IX–XX, 1–31.

as demonstrated by *Károly Goda* in the case of the Sopron elite (chapter 12).

Generational relations were in a constant flux throughout a person's life-cycle. From among the life stages, widowhood is one of the most distinct and best traceable in urban records. The various strategies of widows not only to survive but to further ensure a dominant role for themselves in the family and to run enterprises with the help of (but not subjected to) their sons or daughters is shown by *Gesa Ingendahl*'s study of Ravensburg (chapter 4). The widows of the London instrument makers were also often encouraged in their husbands' wills to go on with the business, either in their children's names or in their own, as *Alexi Baker* brought it to light (chapter 9). In the absence of (capable) children, several "other kinds of relationship – collateral descent, kinship, and apprenticeship – figured largely in the inter-generational transmission of skills and capital", as *Vanessa Harding* aptly puts it (chapter 8). Much of the second section is devoted to these relationships.

Generations in business and professions

Five articles deal with generations in the economic fields of crafts and trades. *Eveline Brugger* looks at families of Jewish moneylenders in late medieval Austria. *Krisztina Arany* deals with a group of Florentine merchants in fifteenth-century Hungary. *Vanessa Harding* takes a closer look at craftsmen in late medieval and early modern London, and *Alexi Shannon Baker* addresses the family connections of instrument makers in the same city in the eighteenth century. In the final article, *Finn-Einar Eliassen* gives an overview of dynastic tendencies in various crafts and trades of early modern Denmark and Norway.

In this context one must consider several different forms of transmission. The most obvious were the material transmissions (workshops, property, capital). Especially in highly specialized crafts, like the goldsmiths (chapter 13) and the instrument-makers (chapter 9), the value of these accessories was increased by their restricted availability and by the skills attached to producing and using them. As *Finn-Einar Eliassen* emphasises, in these crafts, the high value of the tools increased the need to keep them within the family and thus promoted the formation of craftsmen's dynasties. The transmission of workshops was perhaps even more decisive for inheriting the enterprise. Beyond its material value as a building or as real estate, a workshop also transmitted a certain circle of customers to its new owner by the sheer stability of its location. This immaterial value was of prime importance to craftsmen who were selling

their products from shops in the street, being dependent on a conspicuous position and a secure place on the mental maps of their customers.

A special combination of material and immaterial assets characterized the succession strategies of the Jewish moneylenders studied by *Eveline Brugger* (chapter 6). By following the business relationships of several moneylender-dynasties, she established that the process of transmission took place on both sides. Not only did the designated heirs of a creditor (whether brothers, sons, nephews or even female members of the family) inherit the customers of their predecessor, but the subsequent generations of debtors also handed down "their" Jewish creditors to their successors. This intricate web of trust and dependency proved to be an enduring feature of this business until it was crushed by a series of violent interventions in the fifteenth century.

The most typical method for the transmission of skills in pre-modern towns was apprenticeship, both in crafts and in business. The question whether a young person (sometimes even a woman, see chapter 9!) was apprenticed to his or her own father, to another relative pursuing the same craft as the father or a related one; or perhaps to a complete stranger, is discussed in practically every study of this section. The most preferred of these options seems to have been the second one, which allowed for a combination of familiarity with the craft and the gathering of experience away from one's home. Examples of this strategy are quoted from London and from various Scandinavian towns alike (chapters 8 and 13), while among the instrument-makers of London, the rates of apprenticeship to fathers and other relatives were approximately the same. It would be useful to extend these observations to other countries on the Continent in a broader comparative study. In ideal cases, being apprenticed to a master created a close personal relationship between the parties, strongly resembling family ties. This greatly helped migrants with their integration into local societies. It logically follows that "former masters and apprentices were often interconnected by employment, partnership, succession and marriage" – as *Alexi Baker* formulates it (chapter 9). A late example of such paternal relationship between master and apprentice in the German-speaking academic world is the term *"Doktorvater",* a patriarchal equivalent of the more technically-sounding "supervisor".

The transmission of skills among merchants was also often described in terms of apprenticeship, and indeed, descendants of merchants were often sent to a branch of the family enterprise or to other companies, preferably far from home, to gain experience. *Krisztina Arany* (chapter 7) looks at merchant families from Florence operating in Hungary in the first half of the fifteenth century. Choosing a practicing place for the next

generation of merchants also meant the transmission of the father's business network and relationships – for better or worse, since these merchant apprenticeships were not just a walk in the park

Indeed, there were ample opportunities for failure, not only of success, in the course of succession, as the case of some Florentine merchants shows. In some of their families the only way out of a financial disaster for the next generation was to enter clerical service or public office. As *Thomas Riis* reminds us in his article (chapter 5), succession did not always mean success. Demonstrating the gradual impoverishment of some customs officers' families over three generations, he shows that generational mobility could be downwards as well as upwards. At the same time, they had networks that still made it possible to keep their social standing.

The transmission of goods and skills did not always follow the ideal course of life stages. It could easily happen that one needed to start one's business before the material premises became vacant. A late or long-drawn-out succession affected the possibilities to marry and could cause a series of other conflicts. Since such instances are more likely to produce written evidence, there is good potential for further studies in this field.

Generations in politics

The last four articles deal with generations in urban politics and administration. *Sofia Gustafsson* writes about councillors in towns of medieval Sweden. *Ágnes Flóra* looks at the political elite of two Transylvanian towns, Cluj (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg) and Sibiu (Nagyszeben, Hermannstadt), in the sixteenth century. *Károly Goda* deals with the elite of Sopron, a town in Western Hungary, in the same time-frame. Finally, *Finn-Einar Eliassen* also addresses the issue of political dynasties in early modern Danish and Norwegian towns.

These chapters provide a good contrast to the observations made in the previous sections of this book. Succession in families was natural and necessary, in business it was likely and reasonable, but in politics it was far less obvious, and less necessary, than in the other two fields. In this respect, townspeople were fundamentally different from royalty and nobility. In most towns of pre-modern Europe – except for the big imperial cities of the Holy Roman Empire and many city-republics in the Mediterranean region – there was no hereditary patriciate. Access to political power was dependent on the control of strategic positions and career paths. Sometimes, rules were set up to prevent too strong a concentration of power in the hands of a few families, often by prohibiting

more than one member of a family to hold seats in a town council at any one time (see e.g. chapter 10). At the very least, this rendered it more difficult to transmit leading positions and political prestige to sons during their fathers' period in office.

Since holding a seat in the council or the office of mayor was an honorary position with hardly any direct income, and required more personal qualities than learned skills, succession was less critical in politics than in family or business. It had more to do with ambitions and status – and abilities. The term "meritocratic", used by *Károly Goda* to describe the character of government in Sopron (chapter 12) would fit most towns analysed in the other studies as well. Public offices were not even always desirable. For instance, in Swedish medieval towns, persons who were elected to the council had to serve as chamberlains in the first year of their office, and in this quality they could be forced to lend money to the town, as *Sofia Gustafsson* demonstrates (chapter 10). *Ágnes Flóra*'s study (chapter 11) informs us incidentally, that the career of a fresh councillor started as a chamberlain (or steward) in the Transylvanian town of Cluj, too. Even in later years, sitting on town councils could be a burdensome and time-consuming obligation, especially in those towns where once elected, councillors remained members of this body until the end of their lives.

Mechanisms for electing councillors and mayors differed greatly from one town to another, from simply co-opting new members to replace the deceased ones to the yearly re-election of the whole council by the community of the burghers. The right to vote and the rules of election were part of the privileges of a town. In practice, all forms of election resulted in a gradual change of personnel in councils and administration: the most capable or most powerful members were re-elected or retained on the council, often for decades, providing a strong continuity in its work. The introduction of absolutism brought profound changes, as *Finn-Einar Eliassen* explains: the town officials "were in effect parts of the royal administration", a situation which transformed their value and place in contemporary career-schemes, making it less desirable for the leading burghers to be part of the new system.

The studies published here point out various ratios of kin succession in urban politics, from the dominating position of a single family in the Norwegian small town of Tønsberg to the very accidental appearance of new generations of the same family in Swedish towns and a fairly low number of father-son successions in Sopron and the two Transylvanian towns. However, many of the relationships that solidified the network of local elites may easily elude the attention of the historian: its members

were often not each others' direct descendants, but "were connected by different degrees of kinship, residential propinquity, business relations, or other invisible ties" as *Ágnes Flóra* puts it (chapter 11). Among the created kinship ties that could eventually lead to a succession in public positions, marriage played a crucial role, logically enough if one considers the issue of abilities and ambitions. A father had limited means to influence the capacities of his own children, but he could be more successful in finding a capable husband for his daughter. Conversely, an ambitious youth was also welcome to marry the widow of a former successful town leader. "Usually, a favourable marriage preceded an advance in career", observes *Károly Goda* for Sopron (chapter 12). This led to the "son-in-law principle" (chapter 13), to which one may add the "second- (or third-) husband-principle" as a road to urban office.

III

Succession

This brief survey of the main themes shows that most of the articles in this volume are mainly concerned with succession – in individual lives, in families, in politics, business and occupation. The concept of generations seems to be especially helpful here. It suggests an overlapping connection, like hinges, with one generation still alive when the next enters the scene.[27] Succession was not a single event, but a process. Successions in different fields – for instance in business and politics – were not necessarily connected. Different responsibilities were handed over at different times, and generation changes might be consciously deferred or prolonged, for various reasons. A gradual and prolonged process of succession was also the result of "lopsided" or "blurred" generations in the form of a significant age-disparity in marriages, as *Zrinka Vardić* has shown for Dubrovnik. Such prolonged or "fuzzy" succession processes, where the older generation might not be ready to hand over control, easily caused frustration in the younger one over their lack of influence in the family affairs. Discontent and frictions between the persons involved could result in generational conflicts. This is shown by *Sofia Gustafsson* in her study of Swedish medieval town councils, and hinted at in several of the other articles. Members of each generation might have their own ideas

[27] This phenomenon is pointed out by modern sociology through the distinction between "family generations" and "welfare generations", see Fig. 1 in Attias-Donfut and Arber 2000, 5.

and ambitions in business or politics. Also, each generation might develop a style that was different from that of its predecessors, causing anger and contempt among their elders for the perceived sloppy form of the younger generation.

However, several of our authors remind us that succession need not involve a change of generations. There was also what we may term lateral transmission, between persons in the same generation, as demonstrated by *Gesa Ingendahl*, *Krisztina Arany* and *Katalin Szende*. And, indeed, succession could transgress the limits of the family – either because of a lack of (suitable) heirs, or for other reasons. This is exemplified by the involvement of apprentices and other trade companions in the process, as shown by *Vanessa Harding* and *Alexi Baker*.

Succession and inheritance were not exactly the same, but they went hand in hand. Wherever divisible inheritance was the norm, large estates could be slowly divided among many descendants and great wealth thus diluted. Although this would leave more individuals with opportunities to make a career, it would also mean that each member of a new generation would be slightly or significantly worse off than his or her parents. Even more importantly, one should remember that poverty was inheritable to an even greater extent than wealth. This has been demonstrated in many studies of the poor in medieval and early modern towns, and is now being documented on a large scale in the research of Tim Hitchcock and others on the lives of poor people in early modern London.[28]

Succession as a process was not limited to the male line. One of the most important findings of the studies presented here is the crucial role of women – wives, widows and daughters – as *generation bridges*. This function is evident in most of the articles, but most clearly in those by *Vardić*, *Szende*, *Ingendahl* (chapters 2–4), *Brugger* (chapter 6) *Flóra*, *Goda* and *Eliassen* (chapters 11–13). Women were usually the means of extending the family, integrating new members into the kinship, and transferring assets – property, money, tools, positions – from one generation to the next, or laterally, within one generation. Their role also meant that succession was much less of a closed and straight-lined process than is often imagined. Instead, the role of women created a more open, inclusive and flexible process of succession and transmission. At the same time, it explains the prevalence of the "son-in-law principle" referred to above.

[28] Hitchcock 2004.

Dynasties in towns: Tendency or strategy?

What is distinctly *urban* in the cases presented in this volume? How can these studies help us understand central processes in urban society? On the one hand, of course, the focus in all the articles is on urban settings, urban trades (specialization, division of labour) and urban institutions, and distinctly urban legal frameworks. On the other hand, many of the points made here may not be exclusively urban, or may at least have rural parallels. Individual cases may cross the rural/urban boundary: Certain trades were as much rural as urban: those of shoemakers, blacksmiths and carpenters are cases in point. Individual careers and social mobility might not only involve but positively presuppose geographical mobility between towns or between a town and its hinterland, with itinerant craftsmen as the most typical example.

A central feature of urban society was its fluency, which might be seen as providing a potential for forming generations, but which in practice would work against many or even most town dwellers being parts of urban multi-generational families. This has already been demonstrated. At the same time, however, their very mobility would create generations between or across several towns, or across the urban/rural boundary.

The succession of subsequent generations in various professions seems to have been a characteristic of pre-modern urban society. The law of numbers would have made it statistically more likely for some social groups than others in a town to have supplied several generations of practitioners in the same trade – sailors and workers especially. But even among these groups, there was social and occupational mobility. In other groups, it was even more conspicuous from one generation to the next.

Where next?

Comparative generation research faces several methodological and theoretical challenges. One set of such problems is posed by the different legal regimes and practices (not always the same thing!) which apply in different countries, regions and places, and in different periods of time. A lot of work will have to be done to identify real, as opposed to formal, differences and similarities, to disentangle processes from structures, and try to deal with generations on a truly comparative basis, across political, legal, social and cultural borders.

Another, more practical problem, concerns the identification of generations. Family names might change, especially through marriages and remarriages, camouflaging generations in trade or politics. Younger

generations might, in effect, become invisible. Because of the less binding character of urban property and of greater chances of mobility in the urban context, discontented sons could easily disappear from the sight of the family – and of the historians. Even without any apparent sign of conflict, testators often remarked that a child had left and they had no information of their whereabouts.

Generational conflicts are an obvious field for future research. Those studies of this phenomenon which do exist tend to be of a sociological or socio-psychological nature, concentrating on the modern world, or at most having a fairly short historical perspective. But whereas Anthony Esler tends to interpret central upheavals in modern history like the Nazi takeover in Germany, the Hungarian revolt of 1956 and the Paris uprising of 1968 as generational conflicts, Sara Arber and Claudine Attias-Donfut see the generational dimension in the contemporary world as much less important than conflicts of social strata, or gender. One reason behind the difference between the two publications is that Esler is more interested in social and political issues, while Arber and Attias-Donfut are concentrating on economic relationships. The latter also have a very useful general introduction, where they question the whole idea of any one generation being more exposed or more receptive to external events than their contemporaries of other generations.[29]

What we would like to see is the comparative study of generational conflicts carried back into pre-modern periods. For this purpose, the collection of essays edited by Arber and Attias-Donfut might serve as a model, and their introduction as a theoretical guide. The source material for such studies is not abundant, or readily available. It may be found in court cases, where some of the more entrenched conflicts ended up, but also in diaries, letters, autobiographies and other private documents. The challenge will be to raise this type of research from the individual or even anecdotal stage to a more synthesizing and general level, where generational conflicts can be put into a historical and social context. This, again, may form the basis of a more precise theory of generational conflicts in history than Aristotle's denunciation of the younger generation in his own time, or our present feeling that "there have always been generational conflicts". This statement may be true, but it is not very useful as a tool of historical analysis. What we shall need are studies that relate various types of generational conflicts to their time, place and historical circumstances.

[29] Esler 1974; Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000.

Finally, it is the hope of the authors and editors that this volume will make readers aware of the importance of generations in urban history, sensitive to the generational dimensions in history, and inspire some of them to address this theme in their research and publications.

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